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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a survey conducted in 2001 by the American Bar Association, Division for Public Education of high school students who were participating in a week-long civic education program in Washington, DC, sponsored by the Close Up Foundation. The focus was twofold: first, the survey mapped the knowledge and opinions of high school students about topical legal issues of national significance, such as voting, equality and discrimination, capital punishment, and juvenile justice; second, the survey explored how students perceive the presentation and portrayal of young people on television, in particular with respect to both fictional and news story lines about law, justice, and crime. A total of 730 students from 27 states fully completed an 8-page, paper-and-pencil survey. The paper discusses survey results under the following topics: "Knowledge of Legal Topics"; "Attitudes on Legal and Policy Issues"; "What do Young People Watch on Television"; "Young People on Television: What do the Students See?"; "The Moral Culpability of Youth on Television"; and "Boys, Girls, and the Media." (Contains 6 notes and 4 tables.) (BT)

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Division for Public Education
Law Day: Student Survey 2001

How Do High School Students Understand and Perceive Our Legal Culture?

The Results

Conducted by the
American Bar Association
Division for Public Education

In cooperation with the Close Up Foundation

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Division for Public Education
Law Day: Student Survey 2001

How Do High School Students Understand and Perceive Our Legal Culture?

The Results

Conducted by the
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Division for Public Education

In cooperation with the Close Up Foundation

The American Bar Association Division for Public Education conducted a survey in February and March of 2001 of approximately 800 high school students who were participating in a week-long civic education program in Washington D.C. sponsored by the Close Up Foundation[1]. The focus of the survey was twofold. First, the survey maps the knowledge and opinions of high school students about topical legal issues of national significance, such as voting, equality and discrimination, capital punishment, and juvenile justice. Secondly, the survey explores how students perceive the presentation and portrayal of young people on television, in particular with respect to both fictional and news story lines about law, justice, and crime. This second focus will also be the topic of a Close Up on C-Span television program, to be presented in cooperation with the American Bar Association Division for Public Education and the celebration of Law Day on May 1.

A total of 730 students fully completed an eight-page, paper-and-pencil survey. The students, mostly juniors and seniors in high school, hail from 27 states across the country[2]. Students are about equally likely to live in a big city, a suburb, a smaller city, or a rural area. More than half of the students (58%) hold a job outside of school, typically working 10-20 hours weekly. Fully 86% of the students report doing volunteer work in their community, about one-quarter of them on a weekly basis. The majority of students are female (69%). About three-fourths of the students (73%) identify themselves as non-Hispanic white; 11% identify themselves as Hispanic; and the remaining 16% identify themselves either as African American, Asian American, Native American, or from a multi-racial background.

Knowledge of Legal Topics

Students demonstrate a relatively high level of knowledge of topical legal issues, based upon their responses to a series of six true/false questions. For example:

- 90% know that a constitutional amendment would be required to eliminate the Electoral College;
- 77% know that young people under the age of 18 may sometimes be tried in adult criminal courts; and
- 70% know that high school students do not have exactly the same rights to free speech and free press as adults.

Students are less likely to know that only the criminal courts use "beyond a reasonable doubt" as the standard for judgment and that children under the age of 18 may apply for permanent asylum in the United States. Overall, 39% of the students score "high" on these knowledge questions, correctly answering all six or five questions, while only 8% of the students score "low," correctly answering two questions, one question, or none at all. The majority of students (53%) score in the middle, correctly answering three or four questions. These results compare favorably with recent past ABA Law Day surveys of students at Close Up: In 1999, only 24% of the students surveyed scored "high" on a series of knowledge questions; in 2000, just 27%.

Why do some students score higher than others on knowledge questions? Our survey analysis reveals some interesting associations with the 'media habits' of the students. For example, more students who report reading a newspaper "regularly" (44%) score high on the knowledge questions than those who read a paper only "sometimes" (37%) or "never" (36%). The amount of television viewing is also associated with knowledge scores, at least at the highest level. Students watching five or more hours of television daily are less likely (24 % v. 40%) to score high on the knowledge questions, compared with students who watch less television or none at all. Finally, the amount of time reported by students on the Internet is consistently, and negatively, related to knowledge scores: the more time students spend on the Internet, the lower their knowledge scores. Fully 46% of students who spend no time on the Internet score high on knowledge, compared with 39% of students online for 1-2 hours, 32% of students online for 3-4 hours, and only 23% of students online for 5 or more hours. This relationship can be best understood by considering students' responses to what they do while on the Internet. The majority (63%) report using the Internet most often for email, instant messaging and/or chat rooms, and another 11% say they use it mostly for games and shopping. By contrast, only one-quarter of the students report using the Internet primarily for school research or news/information.

Attitudes on Legal and Policy Issues

We polled students about their attitudes toward a variety of legal and policy issues of topical currency. In the wake of the 2000 Presidential elections, we asked students why

young people (18-29) vote much less often. Fully 45% of the students chose the response, "candidates don't address issues of concern to young people;" 19% chose "a single vote won't make a difference." Only a small number say that the most important reason was a lack of differences either between the candidates (10%) or the two major political parties (6%), or difficulty in registering to vote (2%), while 18% wrote in other responses. These findings are consistent with the dominant themes of the 2000 Presidential election campaign, including the televised debates, and also with spoofs of the campaign on Saturday Night Live and other youth-oriented television programs.

With respect to the death penalty, 48% of the students express support, while 35% say they are opposed; the remaining 17% are unsure (an identical Gallup Poll question in February, 2001 found that 67% of adults support the death penalty, and only 28% are opposed). Despite this level of support, only 24% of the students believe that the death penalty is currently "being fairly administered;" fully 56% believe that "reforms are needed to ensure fairness." These beliefs parallel the arguments of advocates seeking a moratorium on the death penalty so as to study the fairness question.

Fully 60% of the students think racial profiling "is a widespread police practice;" only 12% think it is not (28% are unsure). The students' opinions are more divided on whether "the U.S. legal system treats everyone fairly, regardless of sexual orientation." One-third of the students agree, but 43% disagree with that statement. By contrast, the students are more likely to agree that the U.S. legal system treats everyone fairly, regardless of race or gender.

On the media's coverage of news, fully 56% of the students believe "news organizations' stories and reports are often inaccurate," compared with 21% who believe "news organizations get the facts straight." These results parallel the Gallup Poll's findings for adults, which indicate a sharp decline in the belief of news accuracy after the 2000 Presidential elections.

What Do Young People Watch on Television?

We asked students a series of questions about their television viewing habits. The majority (61%) of students report watching TV for 1-2 hours daily. Another 14% say they watch no television at all. Thus, only one-quarter of the students report watching television more than 2 hours daily -- 19% for 3-4 hours, and a mere 6% for 5+ hours. These figures are significantly lower than what is typically reported for youth nationally.

What kind of television programs do the students watch? The largest group of students (36%) report that they watch situation comedies "the most." Fictional drama programs are second most popular (19%), followed by music shows (12%), news (10%), sports (9%), reality-based programs (7%), science fiction/fantasy programs (6%), and talk shows (1%). As for what kinds of programs they watch "the least," students are most likely to mention science fiction/fantasy (41%), talk shows (19%), and sports (16%).

Table 1. High School Students' "Favorite Programs"

Favorite Drama Program *		Favorite Teen Program *	
ER	16%	Dawson's Creek	19%
The West Wing	9%	Saved by the Bell	7%
Law and Order	7%	7thHeaven	6%
Dawson's Creek	6%	That 70s Show	5%
The Practice	6%	Boston Public	4%
Boston Public	5%	Roswell	3%
*What is your favorite television drama program?		*What is your favorite television program that features teenagers?	

The students' choices of a single favorite program mirror these category preferences. Table 1 lists the students' six most frequently mentioned "favorite programs," both for television dramas and teen programs. ER is the favorite drama program of the students (as well as for adults generally, according to national ratings). Two of the students' favorite dramas, Law and Order and The Practice, are law-focused programs, which contain extensive courtroom scenes. Two other favorite drama programs, Dawson's Creek and Boston Public, are designed specifically to attract youth audiences; indeed, Dawson's Creek is, by far, the students' favorite program that features teenagers.

Young People on Television: What Do the Students See?

We also asked students a series of questions about how teenagers are depicted on television, both in TV news programs and on fictional drama programs. In response to a question, "What is the most common story about teenagers on your local TV news?, the largest group of students (40%) cite "drug and alcohol issues." Stories about "sports" are second most likely to be cited (22%), followed by "schools and education" (13%). Quite surprisingly, only 3% of the students identify "crime and violence" as the most common story line about teens on local news. Perceptions of the most common story vary, depending upon where students live. In big cities, 50% of the students cite "drug and alcohol issues" as the most common TV news story about youth, compared with 42% from the suburbs, and 37% from small cities and rural areas. More suburban students (27% v. 20%) cite "sports" as the most common story about teenagers, compared with students living in urban or rural locales.[3]

In crime stories, teenagers most often are shown as "perpetrators" or "the accused," according to the high school students in our survey. Table 2 reports these findings, both for television news stories and television dramas.

Table 2. Portrayal of Teenagers in Television Crime Stories*

	Television News	Television Dramas
Perpetrators	37%	32%
The Accused	37%	32%
Victims	15%	26%
Witnesses	5%	4%
Friends/Relatives of above	6%	6%

*When teenagers appear in crime stories on television news (dramas), they are most often depicted as _____.

In both non-fiction and fiction television, the majority of students see youth most often portrayed as either the "perp" or "the accused." (Girls are more likely to see teens as "the accused," while boys are more likely to see teens as "the perp," one of a series of gender-based differences discussed more fully on pp. 7.) This distinction may a subtle one, especially on fictional dramas where -- in order to sustain a continuing mystery or "whodunit" story line, those initially arrested ("the accused") often turn out not to be guilty.

The most striking difference between the two genres of television relates to the frequency of teenagers portrayed as victims. Students are much more likely to see teenagers portrayed as victims on fictional television dramas than in TV news stories. Fully 26% of the students see youth most often as victims on dramas, compared with just 15% in news stories. Although there are no definitive data for comparison, this may be one instance where fictional television is less selective in its portrayals and therefore more representative than television news.

The Moral Culpability of Youth on Television

We also asked several questions designed to assess how responsible for their actions television teenagers are portrayed, as well as how the legal system treats youthful offenders or the accused. The high school students in this survey overwhelmingly agree that teenagers on television are held to "different standards of law and justice" than adults. Fully 57% hold this view, both for teenagers on television news and in drama programs. Only 19% see teenagers held to the same standard as adults, while the remaining one-quarter of the students is "not sure."

If there were any doubt as to whether students see youth on television held to a more lenient or more stringent standard of justice than adults, that doubt is erased when viewing the results of Table 3. Almost two-thirds (64%) of the students perceive that - on TV news - teenagers are held only "somewhat" or "not at all" responsible for their actions.

Table 3. Teenagers' Level of Responsibility for their Actions on TV*

	Television News	Television Dramas
Entirely Responsible	8%	14%
Mostly Responsible	28%	37%
Somewhat Responsible	49%	35%
Not at all Responsible	15%	14%

*When teenagers appear in legal stories on television news (dramas), how responsible do they appear for their actions?

Teenagers on television dramas more often appear to be held responsible for their actions. Fully 51% see teenagers being held entirely or mostly responsible on dramas, compared with just 36% on television news. There might be several explanations for these different perceptions. On television dramas, it is commonplace for older actors (i.e., in their 20s) to play the roles of teenagers, thereby bringing to these fictional roles a higher level of maturity, polish, and responsibility. This phenomenon has been observed frequently by television reviewers of such teen programs as Beverly Hills 90210 and, more recently, Dawson's Creek. A second explanation would be that television news programs report juvenile crimes and arrests with some frequency, but they rarely report much about the punishments that the juveniles ultimately receive (juvenile court proceedings and records are closed to the media, further complicating such reporting).

A majority of students surveyed believe that teenagers should be held to the same standard of justice as adults. In response to one of the survey's attitudinal questions, fully 55% disagree with the statement, "Young teenagers (13-15 years of age) who commit serious crimes, such as murder or armed robbery, should be punished less severely than adults who commit the same crimes." The students' views on this aspect of juvenile justice are at sharp variance with advocates of the juvenile court, who believe that young people under the age of 18 have diminished responsibility for their actions. The students' views are also at variance with current state juvenile transfer practices. In most states, only juveniles who are at least 14 years of age may be transferred from the jurisdiction of the juvenile court to the adult court, and, in practice, most youth are not transferred until they are 15 or 16 years of age.

Boys, Girls, and the Media

The most striking differences of opinion, perception, and reported behaviors in our survey occur between boys and girls.[4] The media habits of boys and girls differ sharply. For example, boys are much more likely than girls (40% v. 27%) to be "regular" readers of a newspaper. Boys report spending more time on the Internet; 20% of boys compared with 13% of girls spend 3 or more hours daily online. Girls and boys engage in different activities online. The primary online activity for girls is much more likely to be email/instant messaging/chat rooms (70% v. 46%). Although for boys email is also the most common online activity, many more boys than girls spend the bulk of their online time downloading files (21% v. 7%) and playing games (10% v. 5%). Boys report watching slightly more television than girls: 28% of the boys compared with 23% of the

girls watch 3 or more hours of TV daily. But, similar to the Internet, the most significant differences in television viewing occur not with respect to the amount of time spent but with the kind of media experience, as Table 4 documents.

Table 4. TV Viewing Preferences of Boys and Girls*

	Boys	Girls
Situation Comedies	27%	38%
Drama (Fiction)	8%	24%
Sports	21%	4%
News	16%	7%
Music	8%	12%
Reality-based	8%	8%
Sci-Fi/Fantasy	10%	5%
Talk Shows	2%	2%

*What kind of television program do you watch the most?

For both boys and girls, situation comedies are the program genre most frequently watched. Nevertheless, more girls than boys (38% v. 27%) watch situation comedies the most, and three times more girls than boys watch fictional dramas the most (24% v. 8%). By contrast, many more boys than girls mostly watch sports (21% v. 4%) and news (16% v. 7%).[5] Within genres, boys and girls also watch different programs. Boys are much more likely to cite The West Wing or Boston Public as their favorite drama; girls are more likely to cite ER, Dawson's Creek, or Friends as their favorite drama.

The distinct viewing habits of boys and girls also help to shape what they see and the meanings they attach to these images. This is nowhere more evident than in how boys and girls in our survey differentiate between "perps" and "the accused" on television. Girls are more likely to see teenagers as "the accused" rather than as the "perpetrators," whereas for boys this is reversed -- boys are more likely to see teenagers as "perpetrators" than "the accused." This finding is true for both fiction and news programs. Especially when viewing television news, however, boys are perhaps more likely than girls to 'jump' to the conclusion that "the accused" is, in fact, the "perp." These gender differences in our survey parallel the findings in surveys of adults at large, where women are more likely than men to support civil liberties and to see discrimination more frequently.

Conclusion[6]

In sum, the high school students surveyed are well informed about topical legal policies and news, as they express a wide range of opinions about policy issues and perceptions about teenagers on television. These high school students interact with a wide variety of media, including newspapers, network and cable television, and the Internet. Although they continue to rely most heavily on television as their primary source of news and information, the students now use the Internet regularly, often for several hours daily. But they go online mostly to communicate with others, rather than to get news or do school

research. In this age of mass media, it is not surprising to find in our survey that students from all regions of the country and from urban, suburban, and rural locales appear to share similar media habits, opinions, and knowledge. Girls and boys, however, do seek out different media experiences, which almost surely help to shape the different worldviews that, as adults, women and men come to hold.

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[1] Close Up Foundation, the nation's largest civic education organization, conducts a variety of educational programs for youth, adults, and senior citizens.

[2] Students from 10 states -- Colorado, Minnesota, Nevada, Indiana, New York, Michigan, Arizona, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Florida (in that order) -- accounted for 75% of the students surveyed.

[3]This is more likely to reflect differences in the students' perceptions than in actual media coverage, since in most television markets, urban and suburban areas share the same television stations.

[4]There were no discernible differences based upon the race/ethnicity of the high school students and only a few differences based on urban/suburban/rural locales.

[5]Although more boys report watching news the most (and reading a newspaper regularly), there are no discernible differences between boys and girls on the knowledge" scores reported herein.

[6]The views expressed in this document have not been approved by the House of Delegates or the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association and, thus, should not be construed as representing the policy of the American Bar Association, the Fund for Justice and Education, or the Standing Committee on Public Education.